

# The 11th Panzers in the Defense, 1944

by A. Harding Ganz

Frankreich! Visions of *fräuleins*, of the *ma'm'selles* of sunny southern France, tantalized the weary *Landser*s — troopers — of the 11th Panzer Division. The rumors were true: it was the spring of 1944, and the battered division was to be redeployed from the Russian Front to southern France for recuperation and rebuilding. On the *Ostfront*, the brutal struggle continued unabated. The German defense of the Dnieper had been costly, as massive Russian offensives resulted in huge encirclement battles at Korsun-Cherkassy and Kamenets-Podolsky. Fierce winter blizzards had alternated with the *rasputitsa*, the sudden spring thaws, that sank vehicles into the Ukrainian mud, and then froze them in solid again, as in concrete.

The elated troopers boarded their trains near Kishinev, bound for Bordeaux. The rest of the division followed in May, by road and rail, via Budapest and Vienna. But even if the home of the 11th was in Silesia, safely beyond the fighting fronts, Allied bombing of the homeland and talk of the expected invasion of *Festung Europa* by the British and Americans was sobering. Long gone were the dramatic days of the blitzkrieg through the Balkans and the drives on Kiev and Moscow. These had made the reputation of the *Gespenster* Division — the "Ghost" Division, its emblem an eerie sword-wielding spectre on a halftrack. Now its mission would be mobile defense, against the overwhelming power of the Allied armies in the West. In August, the 11th



Panzer would wage a fighting withdrawal up the Rhône valley of southern France against the advancing American Seventh Army, and in September and again in November play a significant role in thwarting Patton's Third Army drive toward the Rhine.

Even if Germany were ultimately defeated, the 11th PD would generally accomplish the difficult missions given it, improvising methods and operations, and contribute a valuable chapter in the history of armored warfare.

## Rebuilding in Southern France

Under its popular commander, Generalleutnant (Major General) Wend von Wietersheim, the 11th PD was brought up to strength according to the 1944 T/O&E. At full strength, it would have 13,726 officers and men in 15 battalions and detachments and divisional trains. It thus approximated the American armored division of 1944 which, with the routinely attached tank destroyer and antiaircraft battalions, had an aggregate of 12,774 personnel, also in 15 battalions and trains. But unlike the U.S. division, which interchanged battalions under three combat command headquarters, the Germans retained the regimental structure with a panzer regiment of two battalions, two panzer grenadier regiments of two battalions each, and a panzer artillery regiment of three battalions. For operations, however, the Germans mixed panzer and armored infantry companies in improvised *Kampfgruppen* (battle groups), and the Americans cross-reinforced companies in battalion-sized task forces and exchanged platoons to form mixed company teams. German armored doctrine was based on the "combined arms team" concept with battalions of the three combat arms — tanks, infantry, artillery — all synchronized to work together; and their opponents had now adopted that concept as well.

The American armored division had three tank battalions, but these had light M5 tanks with 37-mm guns and medium M4 Sherman tanks with a short 75-mm gun. The German panzer regiment had two battalions of mediums, one of the older Panzer IV, now mounting a high-velocity 75-mm gun, the other with the newer Panther, with an even more powerful 75-mm gun. The 1st Battalion of Panzer Regiment 15 had received its Panthers at the Grafenwöhr training area in 1943, shortly before the battle of Kursk. The new tanks had numerous mechanical problems, especially with hydrostatic lock and the final drives, according to Walter Rahn, then battalion adjutant, and Martin Lange, a corporal in the

maintenance section. But these had now been worked out, and with its wide tracks, thick angled armor, and powerful gun, the Panther was arguably the best tank of World War II.

While all three of the American armored infantry battalions were mounted in armored halftracks, production shortages allowed only the first of the four panzer grenadier battalions to be so equipped by 1944. The Sd.Kfz. 251-series halftracks were very versatile, and some variants mounted mortars, flamethrowers, and searchlights, comprising at least 22 different models. They were technically sophisticated, according to Guy Franz Arend of Belgium, who has examples of all models in the Victory Memorial and Bastogne Historical Center museums, but were rather underpowered. The American M3 was mechanically more reliable, but its rubber tracks gave poorer cross-country mobility in muddy terrain than the German steel track, and both had open troop compartments, exposed to overhead artillery fire. To Major Karl Thieme, who commanded the 11th Panzer's halftrack-equipped battalion, German unit leaders and vehicle drivers, veterans of the Russian campaign, could determine trafficability with a more experienced eye than could their American counterparts, and employed their halftracks accordingly. The other panzer grenadier battalions were transported by truck. The Opel-Blitz was preferred, but most lacked the front wheel drive of the sturdy American GMC 6x6 "deuce-and-a-half. In any case, equipment shortfalls had to be made up with civilian and French vehicles, even including wood-gas fueled trucks, and Captain Franz Thelen, adjutant of Pz.Gren.Rgt. 111, found himself going up to Paris to requisition whatever he could.

Likewise, only one of the three panzer artillery battalions was self-propelled, the others being halftrack-towed, while all three American armored artillery battalions were self-propelled, on the tracked M7 carriage. But all the American howitzers were 105mm, with a range of 12,000 yards (11,000 meters), whereas the German division included 150-mm pieces with

a longer range of 15,000 meters, some of which were self-propelled as the tracked *Hummel* ("Bumble Bee"). (The Americans acknowledged their range limitation, and a 155-mm battalion was routinely attached or in support from corps assets.) The 105s of the SP battalion were carried on the Panzer II chassis as the *Wespe* ("Wasp"), though captured chassis were also utilized.

In France, the towed battalions of Panzer Artillery Regiment 119 further traded batteries so each had 105-mm and 150-mm batteries. Experience had demonstrated that the division usually operated in three *Kampfgruppen*, each supported by an artillery battalion, and this mixed artillery support was more versatile. The 3rd Battalion, which Captain Walter Schaefer-Kehnert commanded by September, also incorporated a battery of Russian 120-mm mortars, and a battery of long-range 105-mm guns, the battalion thus providing supporting fires from 6,000 meters to 20,000 meters (11 miles). But because of the variety of fire missions required, and dispersal because of Allied air control, notes Lieutenant Rolf Wandhoff, regimental adjutant, battalion fires were seldom massed, and individual batteries often fired independent fire missions.

Replacements were brought in to rebuild the units. One of the strengths of the Wehrmacht was the concept of each field division maintaining a replacement battalion (*Ersatzbataillon*) in its home military district (Silesia, for the 11th PD). Not only did the recruits share a common regional background, but also were immediately trained for and thus associated with the unit they would be joining in combat. The training cadre were members of the division, and could imbue the new recruits with their combat experience and their unit procedures and esprit. This ensured unit cohesion and morale, generally considered the most important ingredients in the motivation of soldiers to fight. (Many who have analyzed the capabilities of the German Army have unfavorably contrasted the American "scientific management" method of processing individual replacements through replace-

ment depots, the hated "repple dep-  
ples," and allocating them to units as  
needed.)

But maintaining this regional rela-  
tionship proved ever more difficult  
given wartime demands, and by 1944  
replacements were usually allocated  
by Army and Army Group headquar-  
ters as needed. It was the nucleus of  
veterans and the unit commanders,  
who now provided the cohesion and  
continuity that kept the 11th Panzer  
an effective combat organization. The  
unit commanders came from within  
the division, and the battalion com-  
manders of 1944 had been lieutenants  
in 1940. Karl Thieme, for example,  
was a platoon leader and then a com-  
pany commander in Pz.Gren.Rgt. 110.  
In May 1944, he was promoted com-  
mander of its 1st Battalion (half-  
tracked) as major, and in November,  
promoted to lieutenant colonel, would  
become the regimental commander —  
"For me a dream come to fulfillment,"  
he said. Wounded six times, Thieme  
had received the Knight's Cross for  
the Kursk fighting, and subsequently  
was awarded the Oak Leaves and  
Swords.

### Tactical Realities in the West

With the long-awaited Allied inva-  
sion at Normandy in June 1944, Gen-  
eral Wietersheim dispatched a number  
of the division's officers north to ob-  
serve how battle conditions differed  
from the Eastern Front. Their reports  
were analyzed and discussed in com-  
manders' conferences, and tactical re-  
sponses were improvised: Allied air-  
power was all-pervasive, as already  
demonstrated in North Africa and It-  
aly. What Luftwaffe remained was  
committed to defense of the Reich it-  
self. Therefore, standard vehicle road-  
march procedures (a panzer battalion  
moving by day at 20 kmph and 50  
meter intervals had a time length of  
about 30 minutes and a road space of  
some 8,000 meters) were now unreal-  
istic. Vehicles, well-camouflaged with  
nets and branches, with constant air  
lookouts, would have to "spring" from  
cover to cover in Einzelgruppen —  
single groups of 3-5 vehicles. If at-

tacked by the *Jabos* — *Jagdbombers*,  
or fighter-bombers, troops would pile  
out of the vehicles while crews would  
put up a barrage of fire.

Allied artillery had plentiful ammu-  
nition, and its effectiveness was en-  
hanced by accurate observation and  
corrections from spotter planes aloft.  
Panzer artillery fire control exercises  
emphasized coordination of artillery,  
rocket, and mortar fire on concentra-  
tion points, and rapid displacement to  
avoid counter-battery fire. Wire com-  
munication would be destroyed by  
shell fire and by bombing; radio would  
be the primary means of com-  
munication, recognizing transmission  
range limitations imposed by a topo-  
graphy of wooded hills.

American ground advances were,  
however, methodical and cautious,  
halting at any resistance, and as a rule  
ending at nightfall. The *Amis* lacked  
the grim stubbornness of the Tommys  
or the Ivans, preferring to call for ar-  
tillery support. Training by Major He-  
inz Bödicker's Pioneer (Engineer)  
Battalion 209 was emphasized for all  
units, as delaying tactics with mines  
and obstacles would further slow an  
enemy advance. Aggressive recon-  
naissance by all units would be im-  
portant, not only for security, but also  
to take advantage of the occasional  
negligence of the more powerful en-  
emy and launch surprise attacks.

Other techniques employed on the  
Eastern Front were still considered  
valid, if modified:

Clear, concise *Sattelbefehle* ("saddle  
orders" or frag(mentary) orders) were  
imperative, given the pace of panzer  
warfare, rather than detailed orders  
and control measures. This exempli-  
fied the original concept of *Auftrags-  
taktik* — mission tactics, upon which  
German mobile warfare doctrine was  
based. The *Kampfgruppe* concept of  
mixed battle groups, the mix of pan-  
zer and panzer grenadier units tailored  
to the situation, would be even more  
appropriate, but for small-unit engage-  
ments because of Allied air power —  
not mass maneuvers as on the steppes  
of southern Russia. This further re-  
quired that company-grade officers

take the initiative and act decisively  
and independently.

As in Russia, the policy for the com-  
bat companies (panzer, panzer grena-  
dier, and recon) was that a third of the  
unit be rotated back to the field re-  
placement detachment. They would  
get a rest, would be available as a re-  
serve, and would provide an experi-  
enced cadre in case of extensive casu-  
alties in the company, given the tre-  
mendous enemy firepower. In the  
course of the coming campaigns, one  
is struck by the heavy casualties suf-  
fered, especially among unit com-  
manders — in the next eight months  
the two panzer battalions would have  
eight different commanders, the two  
battalions of Pz.Gren.Rgt. 110 would  
have at least six, and the veterans of  
Pz.Gren.Rgt. 111 cannot recall all  
their battalion commanders; even Cap-  
tain Franz Thelen, regimental adjutant,  
can list and date the last five regimen-  
tal commanders but, "The battalion  
commanders changed too frequently,  
one after another." The casualties re-  
flect aggressive leadership up front —  
the adjutant himself often took tempo-  
rary command — and it is notable how  
unit cohesion was yet maintained, and  
the division remained combat-capable,  
the result of this rotation policy.

To engage the Allied beachhead in  
Normandy, German panzer units con-  
verged on that front. Soon, only the  
11th PD was left as the mobile strike  
force for all of Army Group G south  
of the Loire, and even it lost some of  
its tanks and armored cars. General  
Wietersheim had to prepare for three  
possible scenarios if the Allies also  
invaded southern France: an Allied  
landing on the Riviera, a landing near  
the Rhône River delta, or simultane-  
ous landings near Narbonne and on  
the Biscay coast, to cut off Fascist  
Spain. The theater of possible opera-  
tions was thus over 600 kilometers in  
extent (400 miles), and response time  
could be 4-6 days, given probable Al-  
lied air attacks. Only a mobile  
counter-attack strategy after any land-  
ing was feasible. Training intensified  
with a new seriousness, while officers  
did endless map exercises and route  
reconnaissances to identify secondary  
routes and river fording sites, assum-

ing the major bridges and communication routes would be bombed.

On 13 August 1944, with intelligence identifying the Rhône delta as the probable landing area, the divisional units began to move toward the Rhône valley. Two days later came the Allied invasion, east of Toulon, against the weak coast defense divisions. Allied air activity was not as all-pervasive as in Normandy, though the task of getting tanks across the Rhône, including using a 60-ton ferry at Avignon, was a tedious one.

### Delaying Operations

As the Allied armies in the north had by now broken out of Normandy and were racing across France, driving toward the German border, 11th Panzer had the unenviable task of covering the retreat of 19th Army up the Rhône, slowing the Allied southern advance, yet avoiding being cut off in the north. Delaying tactics were now employed, engaging by day, falling back at night, discouraging rapid American advances with hasty minefields of antitank Teller (plate) mines and antipersonnel S (Schuh) mines. The lines of resistance were planned so the next positions were beyond 105mm artillery range (12,000 yards or 11 kilometers) of the last positions, forcing the Amis to displace their batteries forward each time.

Major Karl Bode's Reconnaissance Battalion 11 was especially suited for delaying actions, as well as for the missions of scouting, route reconnaissance, and flank protection. The unit was equipped with armored cars and light halftracked 250s. But surprise engagements had invariably generated a demand for more firepower, and the eight-wheeled armored cars now mounted 50- and 75-mm antitank guns, *Pakwagens*. Lieutenant Werner Strietzel, commanding 2nd Company until wounded in November, feels the ability of the 8-wheelers to drive backwards as fast as forwards, the loader or radio operator being the "reverse driver," was "of enormous importance." Motorcycles had long been



In reconnaissance battalions, eight-wheeled armored cars — *pakwagens* — mounted anti-tank guns and carried a second "reverse driver" who doubled as the radio operator or loader.

discarded as too vulnerable to hostile fire, though Volkswagen's amphibious *Schwimmwagens* were handy. But the versatility and firepower of the recon battalion made it tempting to use in battle itself. That consequent battle losses reduce the ability of recon units to carry out their primary missions has generated an ongoing controversy about the role and weaponry of such units.

As the 19th Army columns of men, wagons, and vehicles retreated up the Rhône valley, they were savaged by medium bombers and harassed by the French Maquis partisans who rose, sensing liberation. The partisans targeted service and staff elements, as attested by Sergeant Albrecht Englert, a radio operator at army headquarters; but they avoided 11th Panzer combat units, and did not affect combat operations.

Several times the more mobile U.S. Seventh Army attempted to cut off 19th Army, but was stymied by the 11th Panzer. Armored Task Force Butler and the U.S. 36th Infantry Division, advancing parallel to the east, swung in toward the Rhône defile at Montelimar on 21 August. Wietersheim divided his units into four *Kampfgruppen*, under Lieutenant Colonel Heinrich-Georg Hax of Pz.Gren.Rgt. 110, Major Thieme of the halftrack battalion, Colonel Wilde of Pz.Gren.Rgt. 111, and Bode's Recon Battalion 11, and attacked. When a roadblock was established on the highway north on the 25th, Wietersheim himself led a midnight charge that scattered it. Several days of fighting in the tangle of hills and valleys discouraged the Americans and they

drew back. Close air support played no role, as XII TAC (Tactical Air Command) bases were too distant. The retreat continued, though the highway traffic was lashed by long-range artillery fire.

Another attempt came when the U.S. 45th Infantry Division cut a highway northeast of Lyon on 31 August at Meximieux. The next day, a 111th *Kampfgruppe* charged through a roadblock of the 179th Infantry and into the regimental headquarters in the town. When F Company was surrounded in an old chateau it was surrendered by its CO. "He was a *Dumkopf*, snorted one of the disgusted GIs, Bob Slingerland, in a recent letter to Lieutenant Jürgen von Pflug, 1st Battalion adjutant — and he spent the rest of the war as a POW in Stalag IIC on the Oder. The 117th Cavalry Recon Squadron maneuvered to Montrevel to the north, but Bode's Recon Battalion 11 rolled up from Bourg on 3 September. Troops A and B were mauled, and the survivors surrendered. To GIs who ran afoul of the "Ghost Division," it was no "Champagne Campaign."

A last attempt was made by the French I Corps, racing along the Swiss border toward the Belfort Gap, but the 11th PD counterattacked the 3rd Algerian Division at Baume-les-Dames on the 5th and ambushed its M4 tanks near Montbeliard on the 8th.

The 11th PD had been suffering shortages and losses, yet would somehow garner new equipment and lash out anew. By 27 August, near Lyon, Antiaircraft Battalion 277 had finally acquired four of its authorized "Acht-



Map 1

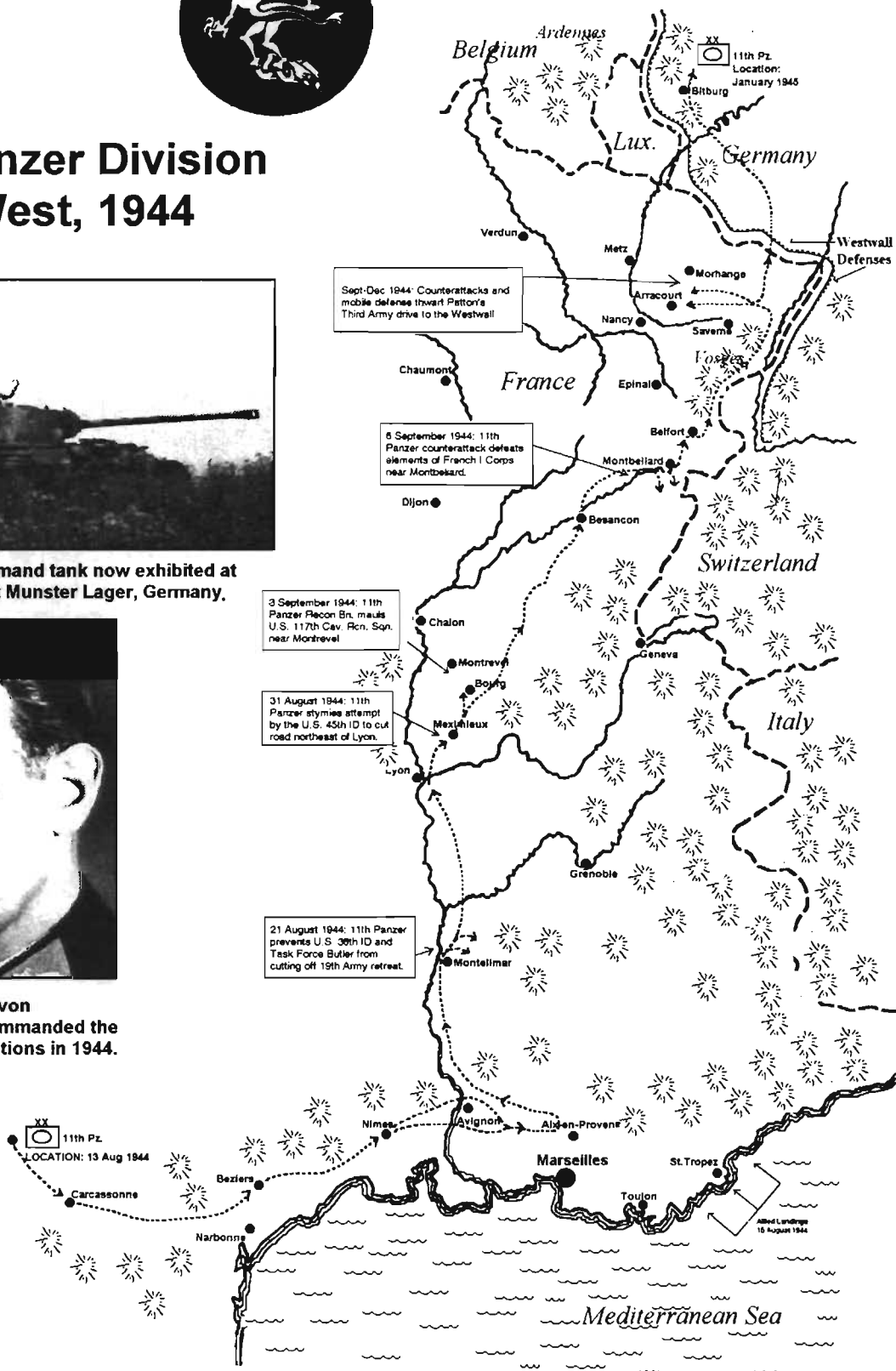
## 11th Panzer Division in the West, 1944



11th PD Panther command tank now exhibited at the Panzermuseum at Munster Lager, Germany.



Major General Wend von Wietersheim, who commanded the 11th PD during operations in 1944.



acht" (8,8cm) dual-purpose guns, equally deadly against aircraft or armor, known to the American GI as the dreaded "eighty-eight" (mm). They were "procured" from a supply depot by the battalion commander, Major Joachim Menzel, who effectively bluffed the depot paymaster, though the guns were intended for a different unit. This gun had a velocity of over 800 meters per second (2,600 fps) and a flat, accurate trajectory. The best range to engage the short-barreled M4 Sherman tank, says Jochen Menzel, was between 800-2,000 meters. The guns also operated most effectively in pairs.

When French M4s came up the Audincourt road on 8 September they were ambushed by Menzel's 88s. On one side of the road, where it entered a narrow valley, Captain Giesebrecht had two guns tracking the leading tanks. Menzel himself was with the second pair on the other side, sited to knock out the tanks at the rear, to trap the column. The guns were well-camouflaged with branches, and the officers did not use their binoculars lest light glint off the lenses. When Menzel shouted "Feuer!" all guns fired simultaneously, turning the column into a burning shambles.

By mid-September 1944 the German armies had successfully rejoined in Lorraine in eastern France. But the Allies had exacted heavy losses, and even the 11th Panzer had lost half its personnel and most of its tanks and assault guns in the continuous fighting. The remaining men were exhausted, and their vehicles worn out. The Panther tanks required major maintenance after 800 kilometers; yet many had now over 1,500 km on their odometers. But there was to be no respite for rehabilitation.

### Armored Counterattack

American General Patton's Third Army had slashed into Lorraine, and in early September Major General John Wood's 4th Armored Division broke out of the Moselle River bridgeheads and drove spearheads be-

yond Nancy. Hitler ordered a counter-attack and converged panzer units to restore the situation. Two panzer brigades, the 111th and 113th, were hurled against Colonel Bruce Clarke's brigade-sized Combat Command A near Arracourt, but the panzers were handled roughly by the veteran American tankers in the days that followed. These were new-type formations that had no artillery, and organic maintenance and flak assets were weak; they were not balanced combined arms teams. Then, when the sun burned off the early morning fog, P-47 fighter-bombers swept the battlefield with a vengeance. The two brigades were wrecked; one commander was killed by American artillery, the other by the aircraft.

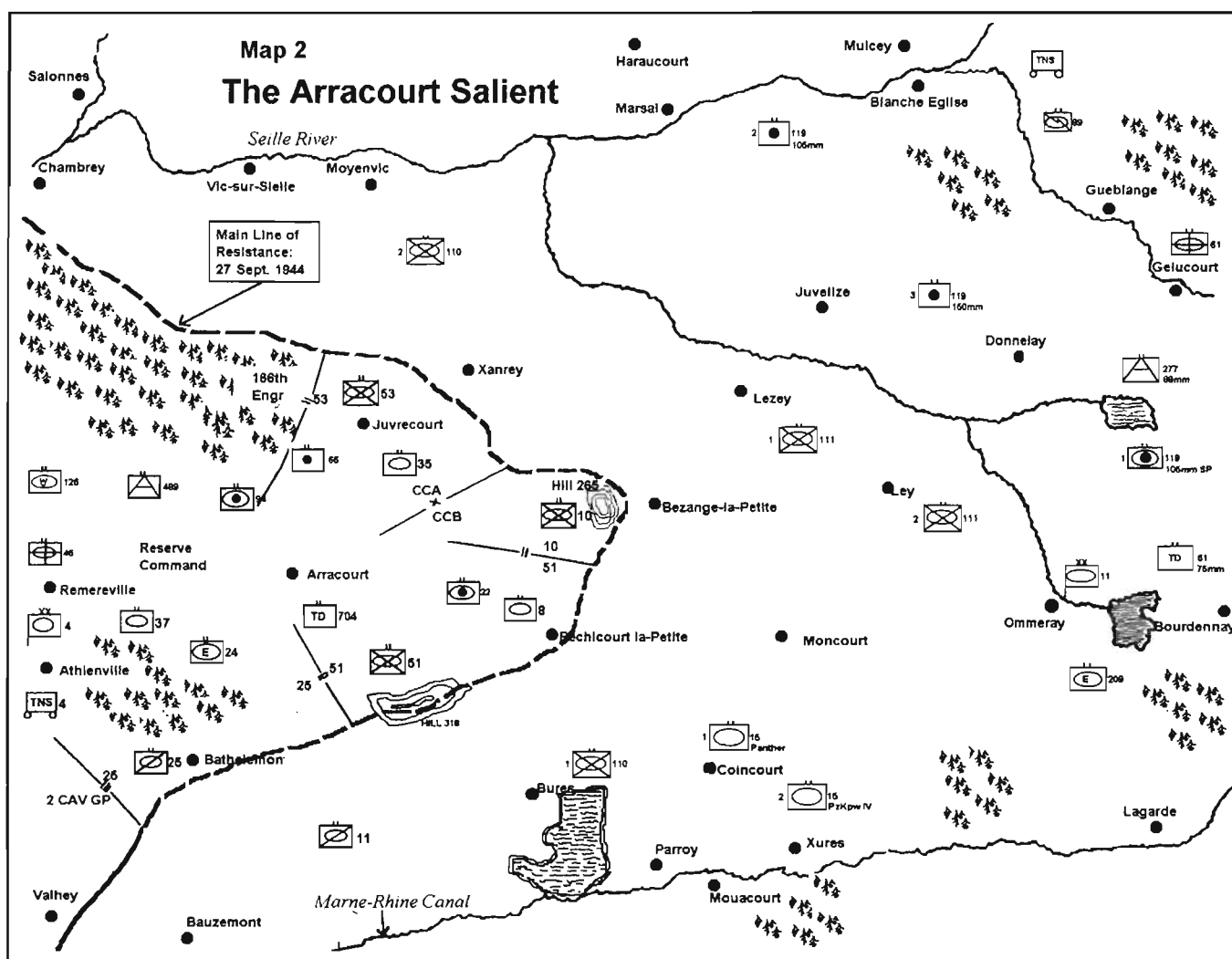
The new German commanders, Lieutenant General Hasso von Manteuffel at 5th Panzer Army and General Hermann Balck at Army Group G, were fresh from the Russian Front and had to learn the bitter lesson that, as Balck's Chief of Staff Colonel Friedrich von Mellenthin said, "it was clear that American air power put our panzers at a hopeless disadvantage, and that the normal principles of armored warfare did not apply in this theater" — something the Western veterans had tried to tell them.

But now the experienced 11th Panzer Division had arrived, and on a rainy 25 September *Kampfgruppen* of Lieutenant Colonel Stenkhoff's Panzer Regiment 15 and Colonel Hax's Panzer Grenadier Regiment 110 drove down the valley of the Seille against the CCA perimeter. This "certainly put us on notice that some real pros were joining the opposition," said Captain Jimmy Leach, CO of B Company of Lieutenant Colonel Creighton Abrams' 37th Tank Battalion. The 4th Armored's Reserve Command had come up from fighting at Luneville, and Wood now pulled back west of the Moyenvic-Bourdonnay highway and brought his CCB down from Château Salins, where it had clashed with Panzer Brigade 106, consolidating his division for some of the most dramatic armor combat of the European theater.

Yet Wietersheim's 11th Panzer was badly understrength. It had assembled in the Sarrebourg area after being redeployed from the Belfort Gap, but had to detach a *Kampfgruppe* under the artillery commander, Lieutenant Colonel Erich Hammon, which included the self-propelled artillery battalion. In addition, Recon Battalion 11 had not yet arrived and Major Arnold Kessler's Tank Destroyer Battalion 61 was back at Saverne, retraining with new Jagdpanzer IV assault guns. In redeploying in the face of American air power, the wheeled vehicle march serials had moved rapidly, covered by the mists of the Rhine River valley, but the tracked vehicles, moving by rail, had been delayed by bomb damage. The trains had moved at night and held in tunnels by day, though 2nd Company of Panthers lost heavily to medium bombers as its train left a tunnel near Colmar too soon before dusk. Pz.Rgt. 15, even incorporating the remnants of Pz.Brig. 111, may only have had 16 panzers fully operational, and only two artillery batteries were at hand. Nonetheless the two panzergrenadier regiments were at about 70-80 percent strength, and with its veteran tankers, the "Ghost Division" was a dangerous foe.

As they attacked, experienced German tankers instinctively sought defile in the rolling farmland, and used their longer-ranged 75-mm high-velocity guns to advantage. Lieutenant Karl Zindler commanded his platoon of Panthers, and also fought his own tank: "Driver, stop! Gunner! Main gun, armor-piercing, two o'clock, six hundred, Ami tank, on the slope." The loader and gunner shouted simultaneously: "Ready!" "Identified!" Zindler finished his fire command: "Shoot!"

Some sources say the M4 Sherman's electric-power turret traverse gave the American tank an advantage over the "manual traverse" of the Panzer IV and Panther. But both German tanks also had power traverse. The Panzer IV had electric power, generated by a small two-stroke gasoline engine. And the Panther, like the heavy Tiger, had hydraulic power, the gunner traversing by foot pedal. The disadvantage of



hydraulic power was that the engine had to be running since the pumps were driven by the engine transmission shaft. But 1st (Panther) Battalion commander Major Jürgen Reichardt and Sergeants Lange and Filla said that in battle the engines were running anyway, according to the maxim "fire and movement." In defense, said Zindler, a tank would be in hull defilade, with its gun tube oriented toward the most likely armor approach, and final gun-laying manually was no problem.

The apprehension Americans had about fighting the German Panther was reflected in XII Corps operations notes to units, advising flank engagements, and warning that head-on at 1,000 yards, 75mm rounds might penetrate "only when hitting the lower half of the mantlet, when they are deflected down, penetrating thin hull top-plate," but that the "Hull is invulnerable to all calibers." The Panzer

IVs of Captain Rodenhauser's 2nd Battalion were less formidable, but did have a lower silhouette. The German disadvantage in the Arracourt fighting was that they were attacking, under cover of morning mist, thus negating their long-range gunnery advantage. And they met their match in the skilled tankers of Wood's 4th Armored, who maneuvered their more agile M4s and M18 "Hellcat" tank destroyers around the undulating countryside in close-quarter engagements.

Pz.Gren.Rgt. 111, under the temporary command of Major Karl Thieme, came up on the right of the 110th as CCA fell back from Juvelize to Hill 265. The panzer grenadiers, riding the panzers or following in their tracks, came in against the armored doughs in their foxholes along the perimeter. Captain Thelen confirms that, at strength, the eight-man panzer grenadier squad had more firepower than

the 11-man American rifle squad, with two belt-fed MGs (Machine Gun 42s) and the automatic MPi (Machine Pistol 40) and selective-fire *Sturmgewehr* (Assault Rifle 44), to the U.S. box magazine BAR and semi-automatic M1 Garand rifle. Both sides were perennially short of infantry, and the Germans were now mass-producing fully automatic weapons, compensating for personnel shortages with firepower. But GIs traded MIs for "Tommy Guns" and platoons were supported with mortars and heavy machineguns, and both sides were seldom at full strength anyway.

Concealed from American air power in the patches of woods east of the Bourdonnay road were the few artillery pieces available. Menzel's 88s were sited near Gelucourt and tied in to division artillery, adding flat-trajectory fire support across the open fields. But alert 4th Armored ob-



servers in L-4 Cub spotter planes called in counter-battery concentrations from the three armored artillery battalions, and called in fire missions that smashed the German attacks with HE. By mid-day the fighter bombers of XIX TAC would swoop in, strafing with rockets and machinegun fire, adding the decisive factor.

Yet the higher commanders persisted in massing panzers for attacks, over Wietersheim's objections. On 27 September, 25 panzers from all armor units launched attacks on the south flank of the 4th Armored's Arracourt salient, beginning a three-day battle. By now, Recon Battalion 11 had arrived, fleshed out with Luftwaffe trainees, young but poorly trained. The American armored doughs held firm, especially in the bitter fighting for Hill 318, and tanks, artillery, and fighter-bombers lashed the attackers back. On the 29th many of the survivors broke and ran, rallied only by the division commander himself. Nonetheless, the stubborn German assaults seemed to restore the German front, and by the end of the month both sides had gone over to the defensive.

## Linear Defense

During the October pause the 11th Panzer held a concave HKL (*Hauptkampflinie*, or MLR, Main Line of Resistance) 18 kilometers long from Moyenvic on the Seille River to Parroy on the Marne-Rhine Canal. By doctrine and equipment armored units were ill-suited for position defense; in addition, one of the two panzer grenadier regiments, the 111th now under Lieutenant Colonel Werner von Ruepprecht, was detached toward St. Die. Thus the HKL could only be held as a series of scattered strongpoints, utilizing the stone farm buildings of Lorraine. In addition, constant artillery fire mandated thinning out the forward positions, and the strongpoints were only linked by patrols at night, giving a semblance of a defense in depth. Pz.Gren.Rgt. 110, holding a sector of some 10 km, had an effective strength of only 600 men. With only a third forward, that averaged 20

men a kilometer! Two or three panzers provided local support in each battalion sector, their squealing tracks at night enough to deter inquisitive American probes.

Captain Johannes Schneider had assumed command of the 2nd Battalion of the 110th near Bezange la Petite. For two nights engine sounds and vehicle movement in the American lines caused his men to be on the alert, but when two young GIs wandered into the front lines, with messkits and apparently lost, it was learned that the new 26th "Yankee" Infantry Division was relieving the hard-fought 4th Armored Division. Stiff local actions followed, and when 5th Company was driven off Hill 265 (by the 104th Infantry Regiment), Lieutenant Rudolph's platoon of three Panzer IVs helped the grenadiers recapture some of the lost ground. Meanwhile Pz.Gren.Rgt. 111 returned, having attacked and stopped the 45th Division in the Mortagne Forest, 6-7 October.

During this position defense, the eagerly awaited company mess trucks came up at dusk, towing the *Gulaschkanone*, the field kitchen trailer with its distinctive stovepipe, to deliver hot meals. The company *Kettenrad*, a half-tracked motorcycle, could also bring up hot rations in a small trailer along narrow trails not subject to harassing and interdiction (H&I) fire. Officers ate with their men, sharing the discomfort of the front, unconsciously manifesting that indefinable blend of quiet authority, competence, and camaraderie that is true leadership. The mess teams would distribute rations for the next day, and depart before dawn. Hot *Wurst* and *Kaffee* were always morale-boosters, offsetting the *Schokakola* energy bars and chunks of *Kommissbrot* hard tack, that was only softened by suspending in coffee containers. Army rations were supplemented by local produce, and Captain Schaefer-Kehnert of the 3rd Artillery Battalion wrote his wife that he found himself the "division agriculturalist," rounding up hogs and



Similar to a halftrack, the German *Kettenrad* motorcycle had a track-laying system instead of a rear wheel.

cattle, and that his command post looked like a stock yard.

The tanks were topped off with fuel, though the crews often had to carry fuel cans up to the forward positions. Panzer crews slept in their tanks, with two of the five-man crew on watch in two or three hour shifts, manning the turret MG and radio. Accompanying panzer grenadiers often slept in a shallow pit, over which the tank drove, straddling it, giving protection from artillery fire and the elements, and warmth in cold weather. This had been learned in Russia, and was a good precaution. Major Ray Mason, S3 (Operations) of the 4th Armored's 22d Armored Field Artillery, for example, said the battalion would fire concentrations 50 yards in from a wood line, for deadly tree bursts.

Sergeant Martin Lange of the Panther Battalion maintenance group did most of his work at night. Maintenance sections were established in patches of woods, all signs of treadmarks leading into the area carefully swept away, hidden from spotter planes and fighter bombers. Canvas tarpaulins were strung for concealment, so lights and welding equipment could be used at night.

If some of the 11th PD veterans pondered Germany's unfavorable situation at this stage of the war, most were too preoccupied with battle, work, and survival to muse for long. Political changes could always occur, new weapons — jet planes, V1 Buzz Bombs, and V2 rockets — were coming into evidence, and defending the homeland, and discipline, routine, and



unit morale kept the men fighting. Nazi ideology was no longer a factor. Most combat troops held the civilian leadership in contempt, and Schaefer-Kehnert often heard the division commander refer to Hitler: "Once again the idiot has ordered....," but not in the presence of the artillery commander, who was a convinced Nazi, and who was therefore often detached with a Kampfgruppe on missions away from the division.

The 11th PD veterans also resented the preference and publicity accorded the Nazi Waffen-SS (Combat SS), who alone were credited with the capture of Belgrade and of Kharkov earlier. By 1944, NSFOs — National Socialist Leadership Officers, were mandated to give "political instruction" to the troops. But the *Nasofius* were not eager to go up to front-line units, and in the 11th Panzer members who had a record of leadership in the HJ (Hitler Youth) or SA (Storm Troopers) were authorized to give troop information classes. These were not really taken seriously by cynical combat veterans anyway.

Finally the 11th PD was pulled back into reserve, with the 361st Volksgrenadier Division taking over the sector by the end of October. Captain Schneider collapsed from exhaustion, but awoke to find his concerned division commander sitting by his side. Schneider insisted he not be evacuated, as the battalion was now in reserve. The general agreed, but ordered the adjutant to report on how much sleep the captain was getting. "Yes, General von Wietersheim was 'like a father' with his soldiers!" he recalled. In addition, even Army Group commander Balck, who had commanded the division in Russia, came down to visit with some of the veterans. Morale of any military unit is highly dependent on sensing the concern commanders have for the welfare of their men. A few of the division received leave, and others received additional training. Major Karl Thieme went back for regimental command schooling, and would return as a Lieutenant Colonel, to command his cherished Panzer Grenadier Regiment 110.

## Elastic Defense

The division received replacements while in bivouacs east of Metz, and tank strength was brought up to 40 Panthers, 20 Panzer IVs, and 10 Jagdpanzer IV turretless assault guns. But 5th Panzer Army headquarters had gone north (to prepare for the Ardennes offensive), and the 11th PD was the sole reserve for Army Group G. During the eight-day rest, Wietersheim met with his unit commanders to discuss tactics against the next American offensive, expected in November, toward the Saar industrial basin. American artillery and airpower, even with the anticipated poorer weather, made large-scale armored operations impractical, and enemy numerical superiority made the OKW (Wehrmacht High Command) order to hold every meter of ground unrealistic.

In a defense in depth, the infantry divisions would hold positions two or three kilometers forward of the HKL with a minimum of forces only, to "absorb" the initial bombardment and attack. The HKL itself consisted of extensive field works and was covered by minefields. The 11th PD was held back as an operational reserve. As the Delme Ridge and the Nied River were designated the first and second positions of the HKL, sharp local counterattacks would be mounted to slow the American advance. "Speed, movement, and surprise," recorded Major Thieme, "should offset the numerical and material superiority of the enemy." Mixed companies, *Panzerkampfftrups* or "tank battle teams" of a tank platoon and two panzer grenadier platoons each, would fight these actions. Small sections of one tank, one halftrack, and an artillery forward observer, if possible, would link the front. Their sudden presence and fire would hopefully magnify their small numbers, encourage their own infantry, and make the advancing Americans more cautious. While these tactics did not conform to the principles of mass and concentration, they seemed the only practical way to slow a powerful American advance along a very broad front.

On 7 November, the 11th Panzer went on alert, and that night elements moved into position north of Mörchingen (Morhange) in a steady rain. On the 8th, Patton's Third Army jumped off with six infantry divisions and three armored divisions, supported by 38 field artillery battalions and the fighter bombers of XIX TAC. By the 9th, the armor was committed, the long armored columns passing through the infantry. But the American armor was road-bound, restricted by the minefields and mud; and sharp German counterattacks resulted in a succession of bloody engagements.

The 88s of the 9th Flak Division stopped one American column at Fonteny, and a *Kampfgruppe* of Pz.Gren. Rgt. 111 occupied Viviers during the night, cutting off another column which had reached Hannocourt. (These were Task Forces Maybach and Churchill of the 4th Armored's Combat Command B.) The Americans finally cleared Viviers but couldn't clear the flanking fire from the forests. The bitter fighting for Fonteny flared up again on the 11th before the Germans pulled back. Two American battalion commanders, one of them Colonel Alfred Maybach, were among the killed in action. The village cost the "Ghosts" as well. The 2nd Battalion of the 110th had come in the night before; Lieutenant Klele's platoon of 8th Company was wiped out in the house-to-house fighting against the stubborn GIs, and the battalion commander, Captain Schneider, was badly wounded by shell fragments and hospitalized until the end of the war.

Also on 11 November, Lieutenant Walter Rahn, adjutant of the Panther Battalion of Pz.Rgt. 15 (and later battalion commander), was at his command post in the Forêt de Château Salins when an excited infantry sergeant of the 559th Volksgrenadier Division burst in reporting that a hundred Ami tanks were advancing up the valley. Rahn immediately alerted the crews of five tanks that were nearby awaiting maintenance, and mounted a *Kettenrad* to reconnoiter. The American column was road-bound, moving up the valley of the

flooded Petite Seille. Though the Panthers were technically deadlined, and averaged only six rounds of ammo each, Rahn found them a reverse-slope position near Dalhain from where they could engage the American column at 1,500 meters from hull defilade, only the turrets being exposed. Several American tanks and vehicles were knocked out; others drove ahead, while the rest of the column backed up, turned around, and detoured on a secondary road. (This was Task Force Bill Hunter's 37th Tank Battalion of Creighton Abrams' CCA.) Contrary to the perception of German regimentation, the initiative shown by, and encouraged in, junior officers and NCOs, was a major reason for the success of German panzer forces.

The 11th Panzer battle teams were the "fire brigades," trying to intercept the American thrusts. The pattern of fighting was of the American infantry advancing through the dripping forested hills against the German infantry, and the armor advancing along the valleys, thwarted by the mud, mines, and 11th Panzer counterattacks. The cold rain and cloud cover kept off the fighter-bombers, though seldom the ubiquitous L-4 observation Cubs that droned aloft and called in the deadly artillery fire. Casualties mounted on both sides in this struggle of attrition.

The 26th Infantry Division reached Rodalbe, but at dusk on the 13th a *Kampfgruppe* of 11th Panzer Grenadiers riding ten Panthers charged in, and most of the 3rd Battalion/104th Infantry were captured. Captain Ferdinand Biedermann, the panzer commander (of 3rd Company), then received orders from Wietersheim to make a night road march south to mount a spoiling attack on the 26th Division's right flank, near Guebling. His *Kampfgruppe* included 17 tanks, and panzer grenadiers in halftracks under Captain Heinz Wolff, commanding 1st Battalion of the 110th.

Biedermann was just about to launch his attack on the 14th when it collided

with the 4th Armored's own attack (Task Force Oden) in the early morning fog. Biedermann's command tank No. 301 was hit and the ammunition exploded. He was thrown out of his turret hatch with a severe leg wound and his crew members were killed. Delk Oden's 35th Tank Battalion M4s and Major Art West's 10th Armored Infantry Battalion then shot their way across Dordal Creek and into Guebling. But the 110th Panzer Grenadiers concentrated that night and decimated the American defenders, and Colonel Abrams agreed they should be pulled out the next day. Oden complimented the 11th Panzer troopers when he said, "those Goddamn Germans were the hardest fighting things we had ever tangled with." The 26th "Yankee" Division finally crossed the creek again on the 18th, but took heavy casualties from Pz.Gren.Rgt. 110, now commanded by Karl Thieme, back as a lieutenant colonel.

Though badly outnumbered, the 11th Panzer was constantly thwarting each American thrust by a skillful shifting of available forces. American air did not fly at night, and this is when the Germans moved. H&I fire at road junctions was fairly predictable, and tracked vehicles in particular could utilize country lanes. German vehicles road-marched, led by a guide on foot or in a VW *Kübelwagen* ("bucket car") with hooded lights. Tank drivers followed the marker light of the tank ahead, the four slits blurring into two cat-eye images at the correct vehicle interval of 25 meters. During the constant fighting and moving, the crews "just cat-napped when we could," ruefully said Martin Lange, tank driver and mechanic. Frequently, the drivers dozed off whenever the column halted, and then someone would have to go back on foot or on the company *Kettenrad* and bang on the fender to wake them up again. It was important for crewmen to rotate positions, spelling the driver, the others slumped in the seats or curled on the turret basket floor alongside the ammo.

On the night of 18 November the 11th Panzer was ordered to redeploy back near St. Avold, for meanwhile the 48th Division had disintegrated

under the blows of the American 6th Armored and 80th Divisions, and the remnants of the 559th VGD evacuated Morhange. In the days that followed, Pz.Gren.Rgt. 111 lost its regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel von Ruepprecht, mortally wounded at Hilsprich on 23 November. When Allied forces suddenly broke through the Zabern (Saverne) Gap, Hitler released the Panzer Lehr Division to close it. But the PLD's attack ran head-on into a swing by the 4th Armored east of the Saar and it was pulled out again a week later, leaving 11th Panzer elements to cover east to the Vosges Mountains, a 50-kilometer front.

The three artillery battalions were more dispersed than ever. To supervise his scattered batteries Captain Schaefer-Kehnert, whose 3rd Battalion usually supported Pz.Gren.Rgt. 111 (now under Colonel Graf von Kielmansegg), divided his headquarters into a rear command post administered by his adjutant, and a forward command post from which he himself operated. The battalion commander preferred a captured American jeep nicknamed *Kleinen Willy* ("Little WillyZ") from the Willys Overland builder's plate, because it was light, maneuverable, easy to cover with a camouflage net, and with its four-wheel drive more powerful than the VW *Kübel*.

## Panzers in Defensive Fortifications

The bitter fighting in the cold mud, rain, and sleet continued around Sarre Union and Domfessel as the Germans delayed back to their border. The opposing 4th Armored lost two battalion commanders wounded and then, after clashing with his corps commander over the frustrating, exhausting struggle, the able General Wood himself was relieved by General Patton. The 11th Panzer was falling back through the old French Maginot Line fortifications, its works of little use since they only faced eastward. Nonetheless some of the bunkers afforded shelter from artillery fire, though unit com-

manders had to enjoin their men not to become trapped in them.

At Singling on 6 December, a small unit action typical of the campaign was fought when Captain Engelmann's 1st Battalion of Pz.Gren.Rgt. 111 met the advance of the 4th Armored's Task Force Abrams. A tank-infantry team under Captain Jimmie Leach of the 37th Tank Battalion attacked the town, the armored doughs riding the tanks because the halftracks couldn't negotiate the mud. But Leach found the position dominated by the high velocity German tank guns on the Welschoff Farm ridge, 1,200 yards to the north, and four of his 14 tanks were knocked out. Lieutenant Karl Zindler's platoon of Major Reichardt's Panther Battalion launched a counterattack supported by artillery fire, but lost two panzers in turn. One was Zindler's, with two of his crew wounded when they bailed out. Leach recently wrote Zindler that it was probably Sergeant Bob Fitzgerald's B-13, mounting a new 76mm gun, that had knocked him out.

The German advantage was their longer-ranged tank guns. They lost that advantage in an attack that closed the range with the M4, and were more successful when they returned to dominating the position by fire. As Lieutenant Bill Marshall's C Company of Major Albin Irzyk's 8th Tank Battalion came up to relieve Leach's Team B, one of its tanks was also destroyed, and the Americans abandoned the town as not worth the cost.

These sharp, sudden clashes were to buy time, slowing the relentless American advance until the German border Westwall defenses themselves ("Siegfried Line" to the Allies) could be occupied. But the 11th Panzer was stretched thin, all along the Saar River line, its battle teams buttressing the depleted infantry units. Elements of Thieme's Pz.Gren.Rgt. 110 counterattacked the 35th Division at Obergailbach; and ten of Captain Rodenhauer's Panzer IVs were dispatched even further to the right to help con-



Karl Heinz Loschke, now secretary of the 11th Panzer Division Association, at right, with the author on a research visit to Braunschweig in 1989. Loschke served as an artillery officer with the 11th PD in Russia.

test the 90th Division's bridgehead at Dillingen.

The Westwall could be a formidable defensive line. Though the bunker apertures were too small for the antitank guns of 1944, the concrete pillboxes with machineguns were sited for enfilading fire to cover the minefields and "dragon's teeth" anti-tank traps, and they could be held by a minimum of troops. Major Arnold Kessler's assault guns covered the bunkers near Zweibrücken, and the role of the panzer *Kampfgruppen* was to counterattack any breakthrough. The Westwall could have been even more formidable, but the combat troops had been denied familiarization with the system because the Supreme Command wanted to discourage a "defeatist" attitude.

Patton's divisions which had borne the brunt of the November offensive in Lorraine were relieved by fresh units to recuperate; and on 16 December some 19 German divisions to the north launched a massive counter-offensive against the American lines in the Ardennes. The 11th Panzer had played its part in slowing the Allied

advance, enabling the Wehrmacht to regain the initiative. General Wietersheim felt his "cavalry tactics" carried out by even the smallest battle groups, were justified by the results. The "Gespenster" could take pride in reading a captured document in which the American XII Corps commander complimented the 26th Infantry Division, confronted by "some of the best German fighting forces," specifically the "tough and experienced 11th Panzer Division."

## Conclusion

The 11th Panzer Division well represents the tremendous fighting ability of the German Wehrmacht, even as defeat loomed by 1944. Studies have been done to explain German fighting power, yet none are really satisfactory. An interesting attempt to measure fighting power through mathematical models rests on questionable data and methodology, and a conclusion in terms of Nazi ideology does not explain German combat effectiveness in 1870 or 1914-1918, well before Nazism. Leadership, training, weaponry, national character, and traditions all seem to be part of a complex formula. In the 11th PD a nucleus of capable and experienced unit commanders and NCOs, and a division commander of ability and dedication, used resourcefulness and imagination to continually assimilate ill-trained replacements, adapt tactics to adverse circumstances, and creditably carry out the missions given them.

The "Gespensterdivision" was rehabilitated in the Eifel while in OKW reserve, receiving new drafts and new equipment. In 1945 it would continue to fight, to the end, at the Orscholz

barrier, in the Rhineland, back across Germany, into Czechoslovakia. As tough a foe as it was, it could also abide by the recognized rules of warfare, and earn the respect of its enemies. In May of 1945, as the Red Army closed in from the east, General Wietersheim met with his commanders who agreed that a delegation approach the Americans to negotiate a surrender to avoid Russian captivity. On 4 May Wietersheim himself met with Brigadier General Herbert Earnest, who had commanded CCA of the 4th Armored Division and was now commanding the 90th Infantry Division. Earnest contacted General Patton, who responded that the 11th Panzer was the "fairest and bravest" German division against which he had fought, and that it be allowed back across the border. Colonel Hank Reed of the 2d Cavalry Group, who had arranged occasional truces with the 11th in Lorraine, stalled negotiations with a Soviet military mission while the columns of the 11th Panzer, depleted but intact, rolled into honorable, unguarded captivity at Kötzing, Bavaria. In subsequent years the American 2d Cav and German veterans would share joint reunions, with the motto: *Aus Feinden werden Freunde* - "Enemies become friends."

## Source Materials

Essential for this study was correspondence and discussions with most of the veterans mentioned in the text. Karl Heinz Loschke, an officer in Pz.Art.Rgt. 119 on the Russian Front and Secretary of the 11th Panzer Division veterans' association, has been exceedingly gracious and helpful in facilitating contact between the author and the "Gespenster." The author met with Herr Loschke in Braunschweig in 1989, and was invited to the division reunion in Kötzing, Bavaria in May 1992. Attendance was supported by a research grant from the Professional Standards Committee of the Ohio State University, Newark Campus. Most valuable has been the materials and insights provided by Brigadier General (Ret.) William W. Molla,

a Captain in S-3 (Operations) of the 101st Infantry, 26th Division, who knows many of his former opponents. He generously shared work of his own on the 11th PD, some of which has been published in the division newsletter, "Yankee Doings." Louis T. Holz, Chairman of the 2d Cavalry Regiment Association, was instrumental in enabling the author to benefit significantly from the 11th PD reunion activities; and Martin Lange escorted the author through the Panzer-museum Munster Lager, and we started up Panther tank IIO1.

The 11th PD KTBs (*Kriegstagebücher* - war diaries) and reports are in NARS (National Archives and Records Service) Microfilm T-315, but the 1944 records for the West are lacking. Related reports and KTBs of LVIII Pz. Korps, Pz. AOK. 5, and H.Gr. G are on Microcopy T-314 Roll 1497, T-313 Roll 420, and T-311 Roll 141. Some monthly status reports (*Zustandsberichte*) in the Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv in Freiburg, in RH 10/49, RH 10/217, and RH 27-11/135 are useful.

U.S. unit records are in NARS, Suitland, Maryland (e.g. 4th Armored Division in collection 604). Panzer Division 44 K.St.N.s are calculated from NARS Microcopy T-78 Rolls 393, 397, and 410, and U.S. T/O&Es of 12 February 1944 (T/O&E 17s) with battalion table changes, copies at the CMH (Center of Military History), Washington, DC, and the USAMHI (U.S. Army Military History Institute), Carlisle, Pa. The USAMHI, where John Slonaker has been quite helpful, also has oral history manuscripts, and the post-war accounts written by General Wietersheim himself, MSS #B-364, B-416, and B-417.

Published sources on the 11th Panzer Division include the division history, Obstlt. Anton J. Donnhauser and Generalmajor Werner Drews, *Der Weg der 11. Panzer-Division* (Bad Wörishofen, 1982), Gustav W. Schrodek, *Die 11. Panzerdivision: Bilddokumente 1940-1945* (Friedburg, 1984), copy provided by Major General (ret.) Raymond Mason (22d AFA/4th AD), and Schrodek's Pz.Rgt. 15 history, *Ihr*

*Glaube galt dem Vaterland* (München, 1976). Donnhauser commanded Pz. Gren.Rgt. 111 in Russia and Drews was division operations chief, Ia, and Schrodek was an officer in Pz.Rgt. 15. Jochen Menzel provided a copy of his *Der Löwe von Lyon* (Berg am See, 1988), Walter Schaefer-Kehnert his privately published *Kriegstagebuch in Feldpostbriefen 1940-1945*, and O'Gefr. Albrecht Englert his manuscript (with Oberst i.G. Brandstädter), *Kurze Geschichte und Zusammenstellung der Kämpfe der 19. Armee*.

Other studies are Jörg Staiger, *Rückzug durchs Rhönetal* (Neckargemünd, 1965) and Erich Spiwoks und Hans Stöber, *Endkampf zwischen Mosel und Inn: XIII. SS-Armee Korps* (Osnabrück, 1976). American operational accounts include the U.S. Army official histories Jeffrey J. Clarke and Robert Ross Smith, *Riviera to the Rhine* (Washington, DC, 1993) and Hugh M. Cole, *The Lorraine Campaign* (Washington, DC, 1950), and special U.S. Army Armor School studies like *The Nancy Bridgehead* (Fort Knox, Kentucky, 1946) and *Armor vs Mud and Mines* (Fort Knox, Kentucky, 1949-50).

Dr. A. Harding Ganz graduated from Wittenberg University in 1961 with a BA degree, and was awarded an MA degree from Columbia University in 1963. Commissioned from OCS, he served as a tank platoon leader with 3/37th Armor, 4th Armored Division, in Germany 1964-66. He received his Ph.D. from Ohio State University in 1972, and is now an Associate Professor at the OSU Newark, Ohio campus. His fields of specialization are Modern Europe and military history. He is a prior contributor to *ARMOR*.